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EDUCATIONAL REFORM AND THE SOCIAL ORDER¹

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The modifications which our school systems need are to be determined, I think, by a new study and a new statement of the real social and industrial conditions in our democracy. I believe that to be the thought which will guide the developments of the next thirty or forty years. What we need to appreciate and act upon in our democracy is the great fact that democratic society is divided, and is going to be divided into layers whose borders blend, whose limits are easily passed by individuals, but which, nevertheless, have distinct characteristics and distinct educational needs. As a rule, democrats have declined to see that fact; so that the schools represented here have been organized and conducted without adequate recognition of the fact that democratic society, like the societies we have called autocratic or aristocratic, is divided into layers. Those layers are four in number and of very different thickness. The upper one is very thin; it consists of the managing, leading, guiding class—the intellectual discoverers, the inventors, the organizers, and the managers and their chief assistants. Next comes an absolutely indispensable and much more numerous class, namely, the highly trained hand-workers, that is, the men who are always going to get their living by skilled manual labor. We may hope that their manual labor is going to be of the artistic sort more and more;

¹ Report of an address delivered at the meeting of the Harvard Teachers' Association, March, 1908.

we may hope that it is going to be a sort of manual labor into which the enjoyable activities of the nervous system enter more and more. We see clearly that this layer is growing thicker, as mechanical power and machinery invade old industries which formerly depended on human or animal muscle. The next layer, indispensable and thick, is the commercial class, the layer which is employed in buying, selling, and distributing. Lastly, there is the thick fundamental layer engaged in household work, agriculture, mining, quarrying, and forest work. This layer is constantly thinned by drafting some of its members into the second or third layer; but it remains numerous and, as a rule, it is comparatively neglected by school authorities. These four layers are indispensable to the progress of modern democratic society, as of every older form of industrial and political organization; and our school systems must be so reorganized that they shall serve all four of the social layers or sets of workers, and serve them with intelligence, and with keen appreciation of the several ends in view.

Now all the public schools have, I think, been organized on the theory that any boy may become the president of the United States, and should be educated as well as possible for that high function, and that every boy is destined for some high function. That is a valuable social principle—that any boy may become the president of the United States. That is a democratic idea which is simply invaluable. To be sure, in any one generation five million boys will be disappointed in that ambition for one that succeeds; but the one boy that succeeds has a tremendous influence on the five million unsuccessful aspirants. Moreover, the elementary schools represented here have, I suppose, been organized and conducted on the principle that a Yankee can turn his hand to anything, and that if he is taught to read, write, and cipher, and to know a bit of geography and a little something about the history of his own country, all gates will be open to him, and he can pursue to the top levels an intelligent and constantly rising career.

Now, that doctrine does not accord with the facts any longer. There may have been a moment when that doctrine was true in this new country; it no longer accords with the facts.

It takes no account of the inevitable effect of freedom to produce extreme inequalities of conditions. It ignores those four layers in civilized society which are indispensable, and, so far as we can see, eternal.

Bearing on this social problem, there is an important democratic principle which we ought to keep constantly in view, the principle that the transition from one of these layers to another must be kept easy. That is one of the fundamental principles of democratic society. Layers there must be; let us have it easy to rise from one layer to another. Democracy instinctively rejects the feudal system, the oriental caste, fixed class costumes, and hereditary distinctions; and yet many forces in democratic industrial society at this moment tend to fix industrial and social distinctions. One of those forces is the modern organization of some great industries with thousands of machine-tending "operatives" whose skill is small, and outlook narrow. This tends to keep the level immobile—it is hard to get out of the "operative" level. Another tremendous force in the same direction—to make society stiff, and its layers distinct—is the trade-union. That is the most undemocratic agency that has ever acted on people by the million in the United States; it is a cement that sets hard and has no mobility or elasticity. Let us keep mobility between the social layers; and let us insist that the democratic school shall discover and give his proper chance in life to the natural-history "sport" in the human race. It is a supremely important function for the teacher throughout our entire school system to discover, recognize, and give ample chance to the remarkable child. Now, I am sorry to say that there has been, throughout our school systems, a strong influence the other way. There has been an actual repression of the able children, a holding them back, an averaging of the fifty-six children that used to sit before a Boston teacher, a marking of time for the quick ones, that the slow ones may be brought up to the march. That is the worst sin in education, in my opinion; and I rejoice greatly that the Boston School Committee has already succeeded in making an improvement, an important improvement, in regard to the number of children to be put before one teacher. That reduction

will give the teacher some chance to pick out the remarkable children and help them forward.

But I must not take too much time on this general question of the adaptation of the school system to democratic society, important as that question is; for I want to point out that a few disinterested and active men may sometimes get good legislation out of an American legislature. It was an extraordinarily small group of men acting under a single leader that obtained from the Massachusetts legislature the act which established the Boston School Committee of five members. The name of that leader was James J. Storrow. I am happy to believe that the group were all Harvard men. Now that act was only put in force, if I remember aright, about two years and two months ago. What an astonishing amount of good has already been done under it! One of the great advantages we have reaped from it is hopefulness about the possibility of improving municipal government in general; for that act has enabled universal suffrage in the great city of Boston to elect five good men to manage the schools. We used to have twenty-four men, most of whom were not good. Now we have five men, all of whom are good; and considering that Boston is a Roman Catholic city by a distinct majority, I think it is a very encouraging fact that the new School Committee was originally composed of two Catholics, two Protestants, and one Jew, the Jew holding the balance; and that three successive elections have maintained those proportions in its membership. Is not that an encouraging fact with regard to the working of universal suffrage in other municipal reforms? I have been much interested during the last year in studying both municipal evils and the chances of municipal reform; and I find the greatest encouragement for the ultimate success of that cause in the fact that many school committees in American cities have been re-deemed, and made efficient, far-seeing, and thoroughly trustworthy. Some cities where the rest of the government has remained corrupt or inefficient have succeeded in getting a good school committee. Effective and durable reform comes there first, because the voters take more interest in that department of city government than in any other.

One of the difficulties which beset American school committees or boards is the difficulty of disposing humanely of old teachers whose efficiency is impaired. It is only by a pension system that any large civil service can be kept fresh and available; and yet very few American school boards are authorized to grant adequate pensions to teachers of long service. For the old teacher quick sympathy is felt by the parents of the children that went to that school. Those parents do not like to have a teacher 63 or 64 years old turned out on the cold world without resources. Yet in showing those admirable sentiments the parents completely lose sight of the interests of the children actually in the schools. It is not the interest of the children to have old, impaired teachers kept in the service. Now and then we see an old teacher that is not impaired; and then, if I may be permitted to say so, he or she is the best kind of a teacher to keep in the schools. This particular difficulty is in a fair way to be remedied, and remedied not only in an effective manner, but in a thoroughly humane and considerate manner, which will commend itself in its working to the American public. The public is almost persuaded that it is just and expedient to give civil servants pensions for long and faithful service.

The Boston School Committee, which was trying to do its very best for the community, and was adopting measures which were strongly for the interests of the children, did not find a multitude of people coming to their support on these excellent measures, did not find any considerable amount of approbation expressed in the newspapers, did not see public meetings held to shout approval. Is not that the treatment generally accorded to administrative reformers? If they do things that offend or disturb the average citizen they are likely to hear from the public—in mass-meetings, hearings, and the press. If, however, they do things that the community distinctly likes, approves, and wants to have done, they will hear very little from the public. That calm is good fortune for reformers. They may enjoy quietly the sense that they have done a good thing, and that the public expected it, and says nothing about it.

In educational reform, as in any other reform, there needs to

be an element of time. That, I think, is the real weakness of the position of a school committee elected for two, three, or four years. Those are the new terms of service for which school committees are nowadays usually elected. These new terms are better than one year; but they are not long enough for educational reform. I chanced to read yesterday a statement which I made in the *President's Annual Report* long ago about the teaching of forestry, and what was coming in regard to forestry—the great need of it in our country, and the state destruction of our forests if forestry did not come to be a valued and trusted profession among us. This statement was written in the year 1871. It is only this year—within three months indeed—that Harvard University has acquired a forest of two thousand acres in which we can teach forestry to advantage; and our department of forestry is not yet three years old. There were more than thirty years between the clear vision of an educational need and the coming of means to satisfy that need. There are plenty of such cases in the experience of men who have held for long terms educational positions in which foresight was possible.

There is one good way, however, of remedying this difficulty with regard to school committees. It has been adopted in St. Louis, the first of our cities to procure a new and good kind of school committee. When a few citizens of St. Louis went to the Missouri legislature and procured the abolition of their former school committee, and the substitution of a committee of twelve whose members serve for six years in groups of four, Dr. William Taussig, who might justly have been described as the leading citizen of St. Louis, was made its chairman, being well advanced in life at the time. He has just been re-elected to the school committee after a short vacation. This indicates the real mode of escape from the difficulty of too-short terms of service. Wise communities will keep the members of their new school committees in service steadily and long.